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Tracing the Origins of Success: Implications for Successful Aging

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Abstract

Purpose of the Study: This paper addresses the debate about the use of the term “successful aging” from a humanistic, rather than behavioral, perspective. It attempts to uncover what success, a term frequently associated with aging, is: how can it be defined and when did it first come into use? In this paper, we draw from a number of humanistic perspectives, including the historical and linguistic, in order to explore the evolution of the term “success.” We believe that words and concepts have deep implications for how concepts (such as aging) are culturally and historically perceived.

Design and Methods: We take a comparative approach, turning to the etymological roots of this term in British, French, and German literature. According to the earliest entries of the term in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, events can have good or bad success. Another definition marks success as outcome oriented.

Results: Often used in the context of war, religion, and medicine, the neutral, but often negative, use of “success” in literature of the Renaissance demonstrates the tensions that surround the word, and suggests that success is something to be approached carefully.

Implications: Ignoring the ambiguous origins of success erases the fact that aging in earlier centuries echoes much of the same ambivalence with which many people discuss it today. Attending to the origins of success can help gerontologists understand the humanistic tradition behind their inquiry into what successful aging means today.

Keywords: Successful aging, longevity, literature

What metamorphoses I see old age producing every day in many of my acquaintances! It is a powerful malady, and it creeps up on us naturally and imperceptibly. We need a great provision of study, and natural precaution, to avoid the imperfections it loads upon us, or at least to slow up on their progress. I feel that, notwithstanding all my retrenchments, it gains on me foot by foot. I stand fast as well as I can. But I do not know where it will lead even me in the end.

Michel de Montaigne, “On Repentance” (1588).

Though he wrote in the 16th century, Montaigne’s statement in the quote might easily resonate with aging individuals today. Not specifically positive, age in the French essayist’s view refers instead to an ambivalent experience of change, loss, and the danger of self-erasure. Thus, though he was one of the first French writers to pen the term “success,” Montaigne himself would not likely have applied it to the phenomenon of aging in the same way that has become commonplace today. Can Montaigne’s rumination on old age, so filled with regret and ambivalence, be somehow absorbed into a definition of successful aging? It was Havighurst (1961) who, when he brought it to the attention of readers of *The*

Gerontologist, started a long-lasting discussion in contemporary gerontology about what, exactly, it means to age successfully. There continues to be a debate about the appropriate use of successful aging as a useful term conceptually and practically. Havighurst suggested that successful aging was defined by “conditions of individual and social life under which the individual person gets a maximum of satisfaction and happiness” (p. 8). His definition focuses on what often is defined as “subjective well-being.” Baltes and Baltes’ (1990) approach considering selective optimization with compensation highlights specific strategies to adapt to age-associated changes, but it remains unclear to what extent successful aging is a predictor of other developmental outcomes or whether successful aging is an outcome in itself.

Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) seminal work on successful aging was defined in terms of physical, functional, and cognitive health, as well as social engagement. Their work has been criticized as too limiting and as narrowing the definition to objective perspectives (Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, Rose, & Cartwright, 2010). The term “successful aging” implies positive aging processes for select individuals (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), whereas others have suggested that the term is not comprehensive enough or is too overarching (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). The focus on physical health, cognitive functioning, and social engagement disregards other aspects important to the life of older adults, such as personality and mental health, yet successful aging in the Rowe and Kahn definition entails very broad areas of functioning. Alternative terms often used include “vital aging,” “active aging,” or “optimal aging” with the implied suggestion that later life can be a good and healthy one (Moody, 2005). Moody noted that the term “successful aging” suggested “key ideas such as life satisfaction, longevity, freedom from disability, mastery and growth, active engagement with life, and independence” (p. 59). Although it is somewhat common to view successful aging in terms of positive functioning (Phelan, Anderson, LaCroix, & Larson, 2004), others have suggested that successful aging can also be achieved even under conditions of adverse health (Poon, Gueldner, & Sprouse, 2003). What has not been explored fully in critical literature, however, is the question of whether or not successful aging can also include negative experiences, thus encompassing Montaigne’s meaning in the quote. In order to do so, we might consider what success, the term associated with aging, is—how can it be defined and when did it first come into use? An exploration of the origins of the word “success” may also illuminate the concept of successful aging in the 21st century.

Most approaches in gerontology take a behavioral view and health perspective on successful aging, emphasizing health behaviors, social contacts, physical

conditions, and cognitive functioning (Depp & Jeste, 2006). To our knowledge, no one has traced the term “success” to its etymological roots. Rather than take the term for granted in its juxtaposition with aging, the purpose of this paper is to take a literary, humanistic, and historical perspective on the definitions of “success” by tracing it back to its origins in Western vernacular literature.

An in-depth analysis of the term “success” is in keeping with the tradition of critical gerontology (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Critical gerontologists engage in “historically and socially situated normative reflection about research methodologies, assumptions and directions” (Holstein, 1998, pp. 2–3). To take a critical gerontology perspective implies reformulation of questions and uncovering normative possibilities thereby “enlarging our perceptions” and paying attention to “what more positivist approaches cannot or do not notice” (Holstein & Minkler, 2003, p. 788). This includes the evaluation of nonempirical sources, often drawn from literature, philosophy, or personal narrative (Cole, Ray, & Kastenbaum, 2010).

The innovation of our inquiry is that it is rooted in language, arguing that the evolution of words have deep implications for how concepts (such as aging) are culturally and historically perceived. The development of the word “success” thus illuminates the way it is used today in association with the experience of aging. As Classen (2007, p. 58) wrote, “old age was not only a personal life experience, but also a mode of speech, a rhetorical strategy, a linguistic device.”

We take a comparative approach by exploring the roots of this term in British, French, and German literature. We believe that the increased presence of the term in many different languages and disciplines suggests that success was a word representing many different kinds of experiences. After reviewing this literature, we will discuss implications for the field of aging today. We will argue that valuable ambiguities and shared experiences are lost in the translation of the term “success” if we do not acknowledge its evolution. Indeed, ambivalence towards age and aging seems an inherent part of the very process of growing old (Coudert, 2007) as the evolution of the term will show.

Old Age in the Renaissance

Why turn to Renaissance Europe? This was a time of great religious, political, social, and ideological upheaval: the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Wars of Religion, the move towards political absolutism, and an increased interest in the arts, science, and medicine, all had a considerable impact on the trajectory

of the human experience in the modern Western world. Furthermore, the Renaissance witnessed a turn away from writings that “emphasized the insignificance and wretchedness of the human being from the moment of conception to old age” (Shahar, 1997, p. 7). Another reason to focus on the English, French, and German traditions is to increase the scope of our argument: Europe in general saw an increased interest in longevity, and in particular, in the ambiguities associated with it, during the Renaissance (Gilleard, 2013; Thane, 2000, pp. 55–60). Like Montaigne, writers and thinkers of the Renaissance began to turn their attention to humanistic questions—a reflection of renewed interest in the writings of Greek philosophers and in the question, no longer exclusively yoked to religion, about what it meant to be human (Gilleard, 2013). We believe there is a great deal of resonance between the cultural experience of aging in the Renaissance and today. However, the purpose of this study is to trace the evolution of the term “success” in the Renaissance, not to address the historical phenomenon of old age, which has been exhaustively studied and documented (Classen, 2007; Cole et al., 2010; Frank, 2006; Minois, 1987; Shahar, 1997; Thane, 2000; Winn & Yandell, 2009). But because we will ultimately link the term to its usage in the field of gerontology, it will be helpful to provide a few contextual details about what it meant to be old in the Renaissance.

In the Classical Period (well before the Middle Ages), the life span was divided into various “ages”; these, for the most part, were carried over into the Renaissance. Most commonly, there were seven or nine of them, of which the last three or four involved old age (Frank, 2006). Other accounts divided old age into two phases, one “useful” and the other “decrepit” (Frank, 2006). Scientists and philosophers disagreed about the onset of old age; whereas many specifically suggested that old age began between the ages of 49 and 60, most writers believed that classification into the various ages should follow a variety of physical and mental qualifications rather than chronological age (Winn & Yandell, 2009). As interest in the study of the experience of human life increased over the course of the 16th century, due in part to a renewed interest in a secular and humanistic interest in man, a variety of handbooks “for a good age” appeared, each claiming to provide insight into how to prolong life (Gilleard, 2013; Minois, 1987). Texts following the Galenic tradition of the humors comprised a sort of “self-help” repertoire in line with other types of handbooks of the time. Gilleard (2013) associates the flourishing of these handbooks with “the cultivation of personal virtue . . . within the broader culture of civic humanism, which included a concern not only for the right way to live, but more generally for the preservation and development of the health and wellbeing of the population”

(p. 210). The idea of personal virtue as being associated with aging was not a straightforward one, however. For as much as “in Northern and Central Italy, age stood for stability, success, and patronage” (Gilleard, 2013, p. 207), aging was nonetheless “tinged on all sides by anxieties” (p. 208). Thus, the Renaissance saw longevity as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, elders were venerated for their increased wisdom and life experience, and on the other hand, the very old adults were often marginalized from their communities, shunned for their loss of youth, physical strength, and their capacity to contribute to society (Minois, 1987; Winn & Yandell, 2009); from this perspective, aging was seen as a malady without a cure, as in the Montaigne (1958) quote. In a society that judged the second coming of Christ to be imminent, thoughts about the human life span were filled with caution and uncertainty. Thus, the ambivalent experience of aging as it is culturally perceived today also existed in the Renaissance (Classen, 2007). Ignoring the ambiguous origins of “success” erases the ambivalence and multifaceted questions that gerontologists continue to raise in association with what it means to grow old. For the humanistic perspective, we would also like to suggest that in addition to studying aging “chronologically, functionally, or culturally” (Thane, 2010, p. 39), one might also study the phenomenon as it occurs in language—that is, with the belief that words simultaneously produce and are produced by culture (Derrida, 1976; Saussure, 2012; White, 2012).

Success in the Renaissance

This work was inspired by the idea that perhaps the meaning of the word “success” might have changed over time (Harriott, 2006), and that certain implications for successful aging might have been lost in translation, as it were. Following Gilleard (2013), who established a link between the increased concern with personal lifestyle and treatises on aging in the Renaissance, we believe that the origins of “success” are rooted in humanism. We thus turned to three etymological dictionaries: one each for English, French, and German (three cultures with very different religious, political, and social backgrounds during the Renaissance) and discovered that the term “success” appeared during the 16th century with increasing frequency compared with earlier times. (For English, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. s.v. “success.” Oxford University Press, 2013, <http://www.oed.com>; For French, *Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française*. s.v. “succès.” 2000, <http://gr.bvdep.com>; For German, *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*. s.v. “erfolgen.” Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012, <http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB>. All further citations from these

entries refer to these sources and will be cited parenthetically as OED, GR, and DWB, respectively.).

Tracing the etymological roots of the word in three different national literatures reveals, above all else, distinct patterns in the usage of the word that may come as a surprise to modern readers. Popular usage defines success as positive, with the antonym implying failure or the absence of results. Today we might say that we went to the store looking for specific items, but we came home without success, or unsuccessfully. But the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which traces words to their roots and identifies their first appearances in literature, defines “success” as a neutral experience. It can bring about either positive or negative results; events can have “good” or “bad” success (OED). The etymological roots of the term “success” seem to rely upon the same sources in French literature. If the word appeared in English literature for the first time in 1537, the French etymological dictionary *Le Grand Robert* documents its usage a half century later, in 1588. Following the English, it appears as a way to describe what happens next in a sequence of events. Success is “the manner in which a thing happens, the manner in which a series of events unfolds.” (GR; translation ours) As in English, it can also be used to describe “the good or bad success of an enterprise.” (GR; translation ours) We thus repeatedly discovered that “success” was not an exclusively positive term. However, today’s ambivalent attitude toward aging corresponds to the ambiguity with which the term “success” was imbued in the Renaissance, even though the phrase “successful aging” focuses more on the positive meanings of the word “success.” The fact that the term contained similar ambiguities in all three languages compelled us to analyze more closely some of the literary and historical examples cited by each dictionary in order to see if we could identify any commonalities or patterns of the definition across national borders and disciplines. Our hope was that these examples, when analyzed more closely, might shed light on why the term “successful aging” is so important in today’s gerontological discourse and how its usage is made more complex by its history.

Though it might be seen as neutral, when it first appeared in the 16th century, success is more frequently documented in association with negative events. Negative events, in the form of death, could easily be found by turning to the battlefield, which, due to the prevalence of war throughout Europe during the 16th century, inspired many texts. Both the French and English dictionary entries pointed us to literary texts with similarly ambiguous uses of the term. We do not mean to suggest that the majority of the early modern population would have been familiar with these texts as, in fact, most people were still illiterate at this time (Gilleard, 2013). Rather, we believe that the reoccurrence

of this term across genres and national literatures reinforces just how differently early modern people would have related to the term compared with its predominantly positive associations today.

Gorboduc: Or Ferrex and Porrex; a Tragedy, a play written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville (1970) in 1561, involves the civil war that breaks out between the two brothers Ferrex and Porrex over the division of their father’s realm. Aside from the fact that the plot revolves around a derivative of success—the succession of an heir—the term appears five different times in the play. In each instance, it points to something negative. Readers encounter “ill success” (II.2.72), “evil success” (I.1.55), the “hazard of . . . success,” (I.2.113) and “dangerous success” (V.2.26). For our purposes, the last usage is of special importance. As the drama comes to an end, the king’s secretary Eubulus laments the misery that has sprung from the brothers’ bloody dispute; he calls it “the dangerous success/of stubborn standing in rebellious war” (V. 2.26–27). Other literary examples continue to revolve around the vocabulary of war. Legal writer John March (1612–1657) asks in his *Argument Militia* (March, 1642), “who shall live to see an end of that rebellion, and what the successe of it will be?” (p. 12) In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 2005), the narrator, describing the hellish rebellion initiated by Satan, laments the demons’ decision to “pursue Vain Warr with Heav’n, and by success untaught” (II.9).

A similar observation can be made in some of the French literature of this period. “The success of the combat will determine their behavior . . . their success depends on Fate,” writes Jean Racine (1972) in his 1672 play *Bazajet* (I.1.53, 57; translation ours). When Montaigne (1958) suggests in the epigraph to this paper that aging proceeds despite his best “entrenchments,” though he makes “the best resistance [he] can,” the implications are similar; aging, and success, both take place alongside the vocabulary of battle. All of these bellicose examples indicate that far from pointing to a positive outcome, success was something to be approached carefully because it could turn out to be dangerous at best and deadly at worst. Success is risky because when used in a negative sense, it can lead to an untimely death.

We might also point to the inherent link between war and politics—thus, to find good success on the battlefield was to align oneself with power. To find bad success would have been discouraging and dangerous. This certainly nuances the implications of “successful aging,” which, presumably, empowers people to have a positive experience of old age, and, in its application to longevity, implies the prolonged absence of death. Acknowledging the hazardous background of success in literature and history opens our minds to the potential difficulties of assessing it as a phenomenon with a clearly positive outcome.

Instead, aging also walks the line between “dangerous success” and “stubborn standing in [a] rebellious war.”

The tensions inherent in success extend beyond examples of war. An additional nuance within the word is examined by Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine two of the most renowned playwrights of 17th-century France. In 1656, Corneille published a French translation of a Latin devotional book, *De imitatione Christi* (late 14th or early 15th century, attributed to the German Thomas von Kempen). Corneille’s text reads, “The most favorable, or the most tragic, /or the saddest, or most bitter success,/ would all be welcome, coming from your most adorable hand” (Corneille, 1984, verses 1853–1855; translation ours). Corneille draws together, in relation to God, both positive and negative meanings of the term success. As the vernacular continued to take shape, readers of this French edition would have been exposed to positive and negative meanings of the word and thus, we might speculate, its ambiguity would have begun to take hold culturally. Just a few years later, in 1670, Racine’s character Titus in *Berenice* (Racine, 1974) laments the strength of his passion for the seemingly unattainable Berenice: “What success can come from such a loyal love?” (II.2.11; translation ours). In both of these 17th-century examples, success is described as something full of contradictions and tensions; it encompasses tragedy, sadness, bitterness, favor, and uncertainty all at once. The ambiguity of a single word can have tremendous implications for the way in which meaning is created and understood within a culture. Understanding success as something strictly positive, as is often the case today, and as is common in applying the word to aging, limits the full potential of the term to bear out its multiplicities and tensions. Aging certainly can signify a favorable experience, but, subjectively, it can also be bitter, sad, tragic, and uncertain—and sometimes all of these simultaneously.

Success as Outcome

Our previous two examples focused on the dangers and tensions of success as an experience. We will shed light on one further Renaissance usage of the term success before turning to modern-day applications of these literary observations. If French and English definitions tended to focus on the ambiguities and uncertainties of success, the German etymology takes a different turn. In 16th-century Germany, “success” is not yet used as a noun. Reflecting the general tendency of German literature to lag a century or so behind the trends in England, France, or Italy, the term “*erfolg*” [sic] does not appear regularly in German literature until the mid-18th century. However, early modern Germany does see the emergence of the word in its verb form, “*erfolgen*” (DWB). It is documented primarily in the writings of religious re-

former Martin Luther and in those of Swiss physician/scientist Paracelsus. Because of political and religious differences, these two figures are rarely compared. However, reading Luther and Paracelsus together highlights the way in which one concept could take hold in different spheres of discourse simultaneously. In the case of “*erfolgen*,” both writers very specifically link it to succession—it is outcome oriented, with active consequences. Luther writes, “it succeeds [follows], then, as everyone knows it happens, that one cannot prevent evil, nor can one expedite that which is good” (Luther, 1841, p. 83; translation ours). If French and English definitions couch success in terms of inescapable ambiguity, the German version removes all judgment. Nor does it imply a *positive* outcome, however. Instead, it very clearly denotes the sequence of events that leads to specific consequences—the expedition of something good or the inability to prevent evil. Luther’s turn of phrase points to two specifically opposite outcomes. Not unlike the French and English examples, then, success has any number of consequences. But it is, in Luther’s coinage, specifically active. Success is what leads from one event to the next, what brings about a positive or negative result. Paracelsus, who, interestingly, also wrote one of the century’s most influential books about the human life span (Minois, 1987), uses success in a manner that underscores Luther’s active usage. Insisting on the importance of fasting to Christian devotion, Paracelsus explains the consequences of succumbing to “gluttony” and excess in daily life, claiming that “nothing that is good, but rather, everything that is bad, all sins and vices, succeed from” the lack of moderation (Paracelsus, 1965, p. 425; translation ours). The physician emphasizes negative outcomes in this passage, juxtaposing them with the absence of positive outcomes. It is quite clear at the end of the day that above all, outcomes are significant. Success is, and has, an outcome, whether it is good, bad, or somewhere in between.

In its earliest usages, then, success (and its corresponding verb) is something that can be positive or negative, and that largely depends on results or outcomes. In literature and culture, early modern success was something that happened as the consequence of something else. It can be positive, but, at times, it can also be dangerous, and unfortunate, and uncertain. Significantly, though, success happens. It cannot be prevented or influenced. Despite the tensions inherently built into the word, or perhaps because of them, rethinking “success” in light of its past ambiguities reflects the current discourse of “successful” aging.

Success in Aging

What can we learn from these early usages of the term success? Based on our earlier assertion that a crit-

ical gerontology perspective could further our thinking on successful aging (Holstein, 1998), the first lesson seems to suggest that “success” has not always and does not have to imply positive meanings. If seen from this perspective, much of the current debate on successful aging should perhaps focus more on the substance of aging rather than its overemphasis on success or failure. Second, success during the Renaissance implied contradiction, tension, and ambiguity. For gerontology, an enriched perspective of success would include perspectives highlighting positive and negative, comfort and discomfort, and uncertainty that are all implied by the term “success.” Third, perhaps the most important lesson may be that success leads to actions, consequences, or it quite simply happens to one. Even if aging is seen as a negative process, it can be successful nonetheless. And whether or not aging is seen as positive or negative, it is always—literally—a gamble with one’s life. The subjective experience of aging is not a straightforwardly linear event, especially within the changing social and political contexts that constitute a life course. Success is a matter of perception. That successful aging should include more subjective perceptions rather than only objective, mostly health-related criteria, has been mentioned by recent contributions to the successful aging literature (Phelan et al., 2004; Pruchno et al., 2010). When read in the context of ambiguous success, aging is a dangerous, stubborn, and inevitable life process—a “strange metaphorphosis” indeed (Montaigne, 1958)!

How can the fact that success does not necessarily imply positive meanings be applied to the study of successful aging? As we have shown, “success” was used as a term in wartime and primarily reflected a milestone or an outcome. Similarly, aging is a process, and this process is success with positive or negative outcomes. One example of this is the study of longevity. Reaching a very old age in and by itself is not positive or negative, but it is success in the sense that one has achieved a very long life. Increased longevity may lead to more tension and conflict (individually and socially) and has consequences on the micro and macro level.

Although an increase in life expectancy can be seen as a sign of success, it may actually not have become much more achievable in recent times. Though Butler (2008) noted that life expectancy reached only an average of 18 years during the Early Iron and Bronze Age and 33 years during the Middle Ages, other historians have adjusted these numbers to exclude the perils of childbirth (for women) and war (for men; Frank, 2006). According to these estimates (widely accepted by historians of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance), men and women who lived past the most dangerous years were likely to live into their late 70s and early 80s by the 16th century (Frank, 2006; Thane, 2010). Viewing successful aging as achieved age or as the outcome of living to a

long life, then, may not be sufficient. Instead of measuring success merely in years, as the model of life expectancy does, it is important to add the subjective experience, or process, of dealing with the potentially positive and negative aspects of aging.

For modern times, Butler (2008) referred to the “longevity revolution” or the “new longevity.” As he pointed out, in 1940, only 7% of Americans had a chance to live to the age of 90 years, and by 1980, the percentage had risen to 24%. The idea of longevity as a measure of success parallels the theme during the Renaissance. As we hope to have shown, then, as today, longevity was seen positively and negatively. Older adults may remain healthy and function well. However, a substantial number of very old adults also face enormous limitations in their activities of daily living, in cognitive functioning, and in social and economic resources (Cho, Martin, & Poon, 2012; Martin, 2002; Martin, Poon, Kim, & Johnson, 1996; Mitchell et al., 2013), even though centenarians of more recent cohorts appear to be doing better than their earlier counterparts (Cho, Martin, Margrett, et al., 2012). Perhaps the relatively recent preoccupation with successful aging is in part explained by a renewed interest in the topic of longevity. We suspect not many would consider healthy young adults or individuals in midlife to be “successful” just because they are healthy.

With the view of a longer life, gerontology researchers and practitioners understandably ask questions about the quality of life. Some view longevity as compromising quality of life. For example, Baltes (1997) wrote about the “incomplete architecture of human ontogeny,” suggesting that the positive balance of gains versus losses is increasingly difficult to achieve as individuals reach very advanced age. Instead of viewing successful aging as an outcome, Baltes considered the negative consequences of success, which come with the opportunity to reach a very long life. Discussed also in the medical literature (Gruenberg, 1977), the primary question in aging is whether prolonging life comes at a price of living longer with more chronic diseases. Gruenberg (1977) quite some time ago noted that technological change results not only in longer life but also in a higher prevalence of increased chronic diseases and disabilities. He labeled this as the “failure of success.”

Defining successful aging as opposite to “failure” is a topic that Kahn (2003) addressed as a rebuttal to some of the criticism that the term “successful aging” used by Rowe and Kahn (1987) had received. Kahn noted that the label had unintended effects of “defining the majority of the elderly population as unsuccessful” (Kahn, 2003, p. 66). Interpreting this as a contemporary American cultural problem, he did not think the issue was of lexicography as much as a dichotomous “all-or-nothing,” “succeed or fail” perspective of later life. Furthermore, Kahn emphasized that our cultural preference

for dichotomy is “the benign wish that no one should fail” (p. 66). From an individual perspective, “the Rowe-Kahn model emphasizes what individuals themselves can do to improve or maintain their well-being” (p. 67).

The view that success can also be negative, or “dangerous,” can also be applied to macrosocial gerontological perspectives. Larger proportions of older adults are emerging in most societies, and the prospectus of continued increases in longevity with corresponding decreases in fertility can be counted as one of the “success stories” of recent human history. However, this success, measured in number of years lived or in the absolute or relative number of older adults in a society, has social consequences that are today discussed in terms of sustainability of social programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, benefiting a larger and larger number of older adults supported by fewer and fewer younger people. A critical gerontology perspective reminds us that success may only be achievable for a few privileged older adults (Holstein, Parks, & Waymack, 2011), and much of the social structural opportunities necessary for success are not provided for everyone to achieve success (Riley, 1998). A more complete model of successful aging should include external, societal factors that enable or prevent successful aging (Kahn, 2003). Furthermore, successful aging models equating success only with good health in later life disregard the notion that success is not the same for everyone, for every culture, or for all historical time (Martin & Gillen, 2014). Instead, one’s own personal aging experiences as well as history-graded influences shape the individual view of successful aging (Stoller & Gibson, 2000). The literary assessment of the term successful aging challenges today’s researchers and practitioners to take a broader view of the term success in the context of aging.

A review of the literature on the use of the word “success” allows us to address concerns raised by critical gerontologists (Holstein & Minkler, 1998) challenging us to reflect on common assumptions made in the successful aging literature. The term “success” therefore does not have to exclusively imply positive connotations or be juxtaposed with its negative counterparts. Instead, critical gerontology also contributes to what Minkler (1999) called the more “humanistic path” of aging, where the accent is on meaning, metaphor, textuality, and imagery (Katz, 2003). Considering the cultural and linguistic history of a term so deeply embedded in gerontological discussion can offer a more differentiated view of its past and present usage and could inform gerontologists about how to more discerningly use the term in future discussions. Further, we hope to have shed light on a more individual view of the term that is in part determined by historical context. The ambiguities under which success operated during the Renaissance anchors current conversations about aging, and

it adds an even stronger interdisciplinary vocabulary to an already complex discussion. At the same time, the experience of long life in its various forms also provides fertile ground for the emergence of a cultural and scholarly literature of very old age.

In line with the approach of critical gerontology, we can learn lessons from the past to become more “moderate” and inclusive in our application of “success,” as it could be both positive and negative. A literary perspective also suggests that success is not necessarily the ultimate outcome of living a more or less successful life; instead, success in the sense of succeeding to reach a particular goal could merely have consequences. The language used to describe aging today relies upon a term with deep roots that reveal shared cultural experiences. As Classen (2007) wrote, “modern problems faced by old people ... can be better understood if seen in contrast to past conditions ... society is in a constant process of transformation” (p. 49). Thus, it is a term that should not be taken for granted. To erase its ambivalence and its relevance to many different spheres of life is to take away shared cultural experiences from which we might learn. Seen from this perspective, success is only one link in the chain of developmental trajectories that carry individuals across the life span and old age.

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